Q. All right. My name is Koritha Mitchell. I’m an Associate Professor of English and today is January 24, 2014, and I have the honor of interviewing Mollie Blackburn, who is a Professor in the College of Education and Human Ecology. Mollie, thank you so much for being with me today to talk about your years at Ohio State University.

A. My pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

Q. Absolutely. So I understand that you arrived at Ohio State in 2001, and you pretty much have risen through the ranks at this University, beginning as an Assistant Professor in what was then the College of Education, and is now the College of Education and Human Ecology. You earned tenure and promotion to Associate Professor, and more recently you were promoted to full Professor. So what I’m interested is, is this the first job that you had after earning the Ph.D., and are you willing to talk about the experiences that led you to choose Ohio State as the beginning of your career?

A. Yes, absolutely. So this is my only job since earning my Ph.D. So it’s my first job. And what made me choose OSU? When I went on the job market in 2001, I had no idea what kind of job I wanted. So I interviewed at a wide array of places, and OSU was the next-to-last interview I did. I at first didn’t know whether I even wanted to do the research institution thing. So I interviewed at a couple of teaching institutions and I realized nobody’s talking about their writing. And I was like, “I already missed that part of me.” And so that was clarifying. So one thing was about research. That was one thing. I knew I liked public institutions because I think there’s more class diversity.
Q. Now where did you get your Ph.D.?

A. University of Pennsylvania, which is a private institution. And when I came here I had just been to U-Mass Amherst and it felt like, well, there were a lot of white lesbians, right? And I had been living in Philadelphia where there is a lot more racial diversity. And relative to Amherst, Ohio State, when I would peek in classrooms, there was just a lot more racial diversity there, which hasn’t actually played out in the students I regularly work with. But when I interviewed, that was something that was appealing to me. And then, after my job talk, somebody pulled me aside and said, “Okay, so you just need to know that Columbus is in the Midwest, but it is really queer-friendly, and these are [the gay-friendly] neighborhoods.” And it was like, “Oh really?” It was a combination of things. It was research, which I wanted, a public institution, which I wanted. But it was also the racial diversity that I was expecting here, and the queer friendliness of the community. I should say, there was one other thing: I interviewed at either eight or nine different places, nine different places, and some people would take the work that I did, which was on sexuality and they would only talk about it terms of gender, which said a lot about their discomfort, right? So they would say, “So you do work on gender?” I was like, “Oh, you can’t say sexuality, right? Like you can’t make yourself do it.” And so I didn’t feel censored here. I felt like people understood that my work was about sexuality and gender, but not just gender, and so that was a relief. I had been in some places where they were like, “Well, you could do,” and they didn’t even catch on to the irony, like, “You could do work on censorship.” And I thought, “Oh, you don’t even get it. That’s exactly what you are doing to me.”

Q. That is so amazing.
A. So that was a relief.

Q. What is it about public institutions that was attractive?

A. I’ve changed my mind a little bit on this. It’s more complicated to me now. But at the time it felt like, there was just more class diversity. I had gone to a private institution for undergrad and doctoral work and inbetween I went to a public institution for my master’s [degree]. And there was just more regional and class diversity. More rural folks were in class with me. I guess just a wider range of people.

Q. I imagine that since 2001 there have been lots of moments when you may be considered going somewhere else, had opportunities to go somewhere else, that kind of thing. So I’m really curious about, what kind of factors have led you to remain at Ohio State throughout all those years?

A. Mostly it’s been about colleagues. It’s a big enough place where you can find your people and ignore the rest. And so when you find your people, you’re surrounded by smart, thoughtful, ethical, really generous people who push your thinking and who like to be pushed – [people] who are in it to learn and do good work for people. That makes me feel like, when I have not gone to places where I have had the opportunity to go since being here, it’s really come down to that. It’s come down to my colleagues. And not that all of them, again, it’s that thing, because it’s big, you don’t have to love everyone. You just have to love the people you spend a lot of time with. And that’s what made me stay.

Q. Excellent, excellent. One of the things I’ve noticed is that you really do work with a lot of colleagues.

A. One more thing I have to say, I apologize. My partner had employment here too, and that was huge. And that is the difference between constantly being on the market or not. I was
on the market until my partner got a tenure-track job. And now, if something dreamy came up, I would consider that. But partner employment is huge.

Q. And I’m sure that’s another reason why size matters, because getting that to work at a larger institution probably is a lot easier than getting it to work at a smaller institution.

A. You got it. You’re exactly right. I’m sorry I interrupted.

Q. That’s great, that’s good. Okay, so we were just talking about colleagues and how important that’s been. I have noticed that you work with people within Education as well as across the University to make institutional changes. You helped create Education’s Middle Childhood Licensure Program, and outside of Education you’ve helped develop the Sexuality Studies Program and the Literacy Studies Program. So what has made these kinds of partnerships rewarding, and also what has Ohio State done to make these things easy or difficult for you?

A. Right. With respect to those two – and they are good examples that you mentioned – one is when I first came here Ohio State felt so huge that working with somebody who had been here, people who had been here within my department, felt really good. It felt like a way to get to know a place on a small scale and get invested in things. And so the Middle Childhood Program allowed me to do that. And I was able to connect again with people who I like, who have similar values, who are really, in that case, really love middle-childhood students, who want schools to be good for all kinds of kids. So it felt rejuvenating in that I was connecting with people with similar values. But also informative, right? I could get to understand my work place a little better. But when I started working with Debra on Sexuality Studies, the real gift there was actually being able to connect with people outside of my department but not on this huge scale. So it
was like a little slice but outside of my department. So it was like, get to know people again, some of whom share similar values, similar commitments, but were just new and had different insights from different disciplines, but also just kind of paradigms. So that I felt like, again, I was doing work I valued, that I’m invested in, with people who also value it and are invested in it, but also just getting to learn more about more perspectives on things that matter to me. So those are the things that make it rewarding.

Q. And just to clarify for the tape, we’re talking about Debra Moddelmog and the Department of English.

A. Thank you very much. That was good. In terms of what Ohio State has done to make it easy or difficult, I think because the kind of work I get invested in is not the kind of work that has, it’s not the kind that makes it into those little investment areas. It’s not lucrative; it’s not going to get tons of NSF funding kind of things. That’s just not what’s happening with them. The kind of constant begging of resources and going from place to place, from person to person. It feels like you’re constantly in debt to people. That is where I think Ohio State has made it really difficult, because they’re not prioritizing efforts that are not lucrative even when they are ethically responsible.

Q. And when they’re linked to kind of the mission of the University in terms of educating citizens to deal with diverse populations.

A. Right.

Q. So if the investment kind of had to do with that kind of mission, it wouldn’t be so all about money.
A. Right, and it’s easy to invest in things that are going to bring back more dollars than you put into it. What shows your character is when you invest in something that is not about making money; it’s about being of service to all the students who come here.

Q. So that’s what makes it challenging. Would you say that part of what makes it maybe easier is, again, back to size? Just because that allows you to find people who are in that?

A. That’s a good point. Like you would never get so many people who were interested in diversity and identity studies, for example, in a really small place. But you can get a good collective of people who share those commitments because it’s a big place.

Q. Yes, okay. I’m hoping to come to a point where I see some plus about Ohio State other than size, but we’ll just see.

A. Right. The people, the people, it’s all about the people.

Q. Okay. So then the other thing that’s been striking about the time that you spent at Ohio State is the way that you are doing things outside of the University in the community. I’m thinking about Kaleidoscope, which is the local queer youth group center, and also Pink TIGers, and also community-based book discussion groups. So it seems like you’ve been able to integrate your research and teaching interests and your community investments. What about Ohio State has made that possible? And what about Ohio State has made that more difficult?

A. I think what’s made it possible is that they have counted, in terms of promotion-and-tenure evaluations, counted the service work I do outside of the University but not nationally. So not working for National Council of Teachers of English or something, but working at Kaleidoscope. They counted that as service work. And not that service work is well-rewarded because we both know that it’s not. But to have it count matters. And also,
and I think this changes over time, but at least in the period of time that I’ve been here, I feel like they could have, the kind of work that we are talking about is not work that is well-funded. I get little grants here and there to do, to buy books or transcribe tapes, little stuff, nothing with indirect cost, nothing that the University gets the money from it. But they’ve supported me in terms, but I’ve still been promoted. Still been tenured, still been promoted, so they have enough patience, they have enough valuing of the work to allow me to keep my job without getting these big kind of grants. They keep threatening to say, “That’s the key to keeping your job,” but it hasn’t played out that way. And so I think that’s the way that Ohio State has kind of allowed me, made the work possible. And I’ve interviewed at places where I don’t think it would have been possible, that I would not have been able to do the kind of community-based work I wanted to do, because it wouldn’t have been funded in the way it needed to be funded, and I wouldn’t have been able to keep my job without that funding.

Q. Okay, so just to clarify and make sure that this is legible across different fields: So it sounds like part of what you’re saying is that, in Education very often the projects that you undertake need to be recognized by large government grants or large foundation grants. When you get those kinds of grants, it shows the value of the project. It brings prestige to the University, and it’s another way of someone other than Ohio State saying that this is important work that deserves recognition. In a lot of different cases, being able to get that kind of national funding that comes with prestige, is the only way that people can keep their jobs and get tenure. You’re saying that in Education that’s very often the case, that if you don’t bring in a certain level of grants, that sometimes you won’t get promoted.
A. I think it’s a real conflict. First of all, it’s not just the prestige; it’s the indirect cost. So I think it’s, like, 50 percent. So if I get a publicly funded grant that’s worth $100,000, as much as $50,000 might go to the University. So if it were just about prestige, I could play that game better. But it’s not. But whether or not people actually don’t get their jobs for it, I will tell you it’s an easier case, somebody has a much easier time going through if they have big grants. People who don’t have big grants, if they have really solid publication records, it has been my experience that people still keep their jobs. And that’s what I’m saying. That’s what Ohio State does that makes the kind of work I do possible, is the willingness to accept publications and the prestige associated with them, publications in the right places, and have that count as scholarship, even when there’s not the big grants that go with it. In some [universities] outside of Ohio State, I think it varies. There are definitely research one institutions, that if you’re not getting the grants with indirects, which typically aren’t foundations. They are typically the publicly funded ones. That’s what you do to keep your job. That’s what you do.

Q. Wow, very interesting.

A. So you have to do a certain kind of work, like it’s a certain kind of paradigm, certain kind of scale, a certain methodology that goes with it. It actually defines quite a bit.

Q. It defines the projects that you would take on, the questions you would ask, in the same way that it would define the questions that scientists are asking right now.

A. Exactly, in the realm of education and school.

Q. Wow, that is really something. As you know, this is an archive that is about women at Ohio State and so I’m wondering about the extent to which you feel being a woman has
shaped your experiences here? If it has shaped them, then how? If you don’t think being a woman has shaped your experiences, then what about Ohio State makes that possible?

A. Yes, right. I definitely think being a woman has shaped my experiences at Ohio State. So I’ll answer that question. I think there are sometimes where there are men, particularly men who have been here a really long time, will dismiss me or overlook me, and other women, not laugh at me. It’s not like a mockery; it’s mostly an erasure. It’s more of an erasure than a mockery kind of thing. Because I’m a woman and I know that. But also, there are powerful and strong women who I might never have had the chance to encounter and learn from and watch with admiration if I weren’t here. So I think it’s on both ends. I’ve seen misogynist men who just will completely dismiss me. But then I’ve also seen women who are just like taking it on and winning. And that is really amazing. I’ve got to say, when I look at women like that, and actually the men who work well with them too, it’s not just the women but men who get that that is a more productive way forward. I admire that too and want to be a part of that kind of dynamic. And mostly the dismissive ones just feel archaic to me. There are times when I will be really frustrated, like, “Stop!” I can picture walking out of meetings and being really, really frustrated. But in general I just feel a little bit like, “Oh wow, your day is so over. That’s not where things are going.” So mostly I don’t feel, it doesn’t drag me down too much.

Q. Would you say there is any difference on that question, in terms of interactions with senior men? Have you seen a difference in the experiences that you’re having, and also maybe the way that you handle those experiences as you have risen through the ranks?

A. That’s a good question. That’s a great question. Yes. When I’m thinking about those really frustrated moments, it was definitely earlier, and where the stakes probably felt a
lot higher. Whereas now that I feel more secure in my position, I think I’m probably less bothered by it. Yes, that’s a good point.

Q. So then if we pan out from individual to think about structure, is there any way in which you feel like there are certain structures at Ohio State that maybe have made your relationships with those powerful women that you admire more possible?

A. Yes.

Q. Or things like that?

A. Oh yes. Somehow I started being on the Senate, Faculty Senate, being on Faculty Senate to me actually replicates some of the inequitable gender dynamics. You see a lot of men at the head of the table there, and a lot of Roberts Rules – real controlling sorts of language and ways of keeping you in your place. But through Senate I got to be on the Council of Academic Affairs on which I’ve learned so much. Which is where I’ve gotten to see some really strong women just assert themselves, and make good changes, and pay attention to things that matter to them. I would have never have gotten to see those particular women in action had I not gotten to go through Senate to Council of Academic Affairs. When I used to present stuff, Debra Moddelmog and I would go to Council of Academic Affairs to present our proposals around sexuality studies, which was terribly nerve-wracking. I did not like it at all. But Leslie Alexander [a Department of African and African-American Studies faculty member] was there and she would wave to us when we came in. And it completely changed, it sounds dumb, but it made you feel like, these are people. These are people. This is not a board kind of thing. And then since she started working with Faculty Council, which I always thought was something that didn’t do anything, she’s like, she has shown this is the way it could function. This is the work
we should be doing with this mechanism. And so being able to watch, I think, people make that kind of change. That’s cool. It’s cool to humanize a space and it’s cool to assert faculty authority in a space. I think that’s good work.

Q. And just in my time here, I guess, 8 ½ years, I do feel like I’ve seen a shift toward anything other than faculty governance, and so I can imagine the power of that moment that you’re describing, is to actually feel like, yes, this faculty-oriented body could actually regain some power. I could see how that would be important.

A. In your time but my time also, the amount of faculty control has consistently diminished. I imagine that we are reaching a turning point on that, because I don’t think the faculty can stand much more.

Q. Good. Yes. Okay. Also, outside of being a woman and understanding how that has affected your experiences, what are the other ways that you identify yourself? You’ve already mentioned that your research is on queer identities and sexualities. And so you can talk about that. But if there are other ways that you identify that you actually can identify how it has affected how you’ve navigated this space, and maybe even how people respond to you. I imagine there are some things about your identity that maybe people clearly see or respond to, and other things that they don’t see and respond to. So if you could just talk about those kinds of things.

A. Right, absolutely. I think in terms of gender and sexuality, those are the kind of things that I’ve lacked the privilege and therefore noticed the biases. And so that I fight those fights regularly, and that’s like part of who I am in the world. But also I am I this white person in the world, so I think that a lot of things are easier negotiating, and particularly when I share conversations with faculty who are, whether it’s around spousal hires or it’s
around the whole recruitment process, or maintaining faculty, I don’t think this University is treating people of color right in this regard. And I think that, I can feel that privilege. That’s not how it went down for me. And that is about my race. That is what that is about. It is not about anything other than that. So I think that influences how I experience the University. The gender and sexuality thing is another thing. There’s also this thing around class and educational background. I think I’m not alone anyway in feeling the imposter syndrome. Neither one of my parents went to college. So then a lot of times I’ll be in a conversation and be like, “I don’t know what I’m talking about.” They are talking about something that is not part of my upbringing, not like my regular vocabulary. Like there’s a conversation here and I know it’s happening but I don’t know, I’m not following it. And so I think that part is the one that tricks me. I forget. I think, I’m qualified, right? Because I went to school for a really long time. I think I am qualified because of what I have done and I don’t realize, I get blindsided by the fact that I am not qualified in some ways because of what my family has or has not done. And that’s the one that throws me the most. That’s the one that I am the least used to paying attention to.

Q. So sort of a pedigree issue? So can you think of a specific example?

A. That’s a good question. I’m thinking of it in terms of – the first example doesn’t really apply to OSU, but I think it will get me to the next example. I’m thinking about when I applied to doctoral programs. I applied to doctoral programs that looked cool; their values kind of aligned with mine. They had a social justice mission or they had an urban education focus or something like that. I didn’t know that people looked up faculty and their scholarly interests, and knew to put them in essays. I didn’t know that game. But
neither did I know it when I applied for jobs. So I didn’t know that I should, that if I’m doing work in this area, I should cite these people at this location because they’re there. So when I interviewed at Amherst again, I was citing Deb Britt [a North Carolina educator who received her doctorate] in Ohio [University], they were like, “Do you know she was a Doc student here?” And I was like, “Okay.” That’s one of those things you’re supposed to do. So it’s the networking I guess. I love one-on-one conversations. I’m not a good networker. It’s very uncomfortable for me. And I’m not good at it. That kind of thing makes me feel worse at it. So that just knowing that I should have had conversations with these three people before I brought this proposal to the table – I just didn’t know. I kind of followed the rules. It says to bring the proposal. I’ll just bring the proposal.

Q. So the unwritten rules. It’s following the written rules.

A. I can do that. I can follow the written rules. Or even fight the written rules. But it’s the unwritten rules that like completely throw me.

Q. And academics is a land mine for that kind of thing, in terms of the entire profession?

A. Yes, it is and I think the people who know the unwritten rules don’t even know they know them, because it’s such a way of being. It’s ingrained. So I think there are probably some people who are hoarding them, but I don’t think that’s really the issue. I think it’s mostly that they know them and I don’t know them, but they function by them, and I don’t function by them.

Q. Exactly. Wow. Okay, so one of the reasons that I wanted to interview you has to do with the tremendous success outside of Ohio State that you had. The quality of your research has been acknowledged nationally and internationally, with awards from the American
Educational Research Association, for not just individual publications, individual books, but for your body of work. And so I wanted you to share a bit for the Archives about your research and what you believe some of its most important contributions have been.

A. All right. My field most generally is education, then adolescent literacy, and consistently, since I started being a teacher in – I guess that was ’91 – I’ve always been interested in or committed to making schools work for kids for whom it doesn’t always work. And then the kids I’ve connected with the best when I’ve been teaching middle school. It feels so important to me, that we are a society that relies so much on schooling and when schooling doesn’t function for somebody, it really is damaging to somebody’s life. That’s always been my focus since I started teaching, student teaching I guess. And then when I started working at the LGBT Youth Center in Philadelphia, which is called The Attic, I had been coming at the question of what about school works for whom and not from a school-based perspective. And when I worked in a youth center, all of a sudden it was like, there’s a whole other level of schools not working for kids I didn’t even get. These kids don’t even come into my class. I don’t even get to meet them. And that is a really driving force for me. That matters a lot. Wow, kids should want to go to school, [kids] who want to be high achieving, for whom achievement is not the issue. Can’t even get in because it’s not safe for them. That is some kind of messed up. So that feels like a calling. That is work that needs to be done. That is change that needs to happen. That’s what I want to be a part of. That’s what I want my work to be and to do. And I think it can shift. Like some of my projects focus on the young people in their agency, but some of my projects focus on teachers and what they can do to make a better space. More recently I’m part of a project where I’ve interviewed families and how they are invited or
not into schools. So I don’t think it can come from any one place or that even that it’s most effective coming from one place. I think it can come from a lot of different directions, but the driving force is always about making schools better places for kids to become who they want to become, and be who they are. And I think that’s the contribution I want to make. I want to make it here in Columbus or Philadelphia where I was, anyplace I’ve been I want to make it there. But I think with writing about it sometimes you can make that possible in the context that everyone gets to see it.

Q. Exactly. So you’re actually headed where I was headed, I guess, because what I was going to ask was, you start out, it sounds like, having been a middle school teacher yourself, and then making the transition to becoming a professor and a scholar who is writing about the issues. As you look back on your career, how do you think about the difference between the middle school teacher to what you do now? How do you think about that and the different kinds of impact those things have had?

A. Right, right. I have to worry about that a lot actually. When I earned my master’s I was teaching at the same time and that was great, because you could have adult interaction and intellectual stimulation in the night time. And in the day time you were getting to try out new ideas and you were with adolescents who were just the best all day long. And so that was a really great balance. But it’s really hard to sustain, I think, to be working all day and going to school all night. It’s just hard. During that time I was part of a teacher inquiry group and I was like, “Oh, I like this writing stuff. This is fun. I’ll try more research.” And so that’s when I decided to apply to doctorate programs. But I was pretty committed to going full-time because it felt to not teaching anymore and going fulltime. But when I started doing it, I missed kids. I couldn’t remember why it was important. I
kept thinking, why am I reading this stuff? Why am I writing this stuff? It was disorienting. So I started volunteering at the youth center, really, to be around kids, like I needed to remember. That was what provoked me to do that. And that also was a really good balance. So I could write in the mornings and hang with kids at the youth center at night. That was really good. So the first ten years I was here – 2002 to 2012 – I continued to volunteer at Kaleidoscope, an LGBT youth center here. I think you mentioned it earlier. And that, in some ways, filled that need for me. But I couldn’t do the work I needed to do in my job and spend the time I needed to spend in the center, to be beneficial for them or for me. Like it just wasn’t enough time. I was spending 20 hours a week at the center in Philadelphia, and I spent maybe three hours a week in the center here. And it never really worked that well. When it worked well is when there was a group. So, like, the book discussion group. That was over three years. It was pretty much the same group of people who came together and really focused on something. And I felt like those were sustainable relationships and those felt productive. But when that ended, which ended a very natural death, it was like the kids who had started were freshmen and they were becoming seniors. It felt right. It didn’t feel bad that it ended. But it had left a gap for me that I haven’t figured out a way to fill. And that’s been a couple of years. And I stopped volunteering at Kaleidoscope shortly after that because it wasn’t working for them or me. And I still work with a teacher inquiry group, so I get to hang with teachers very regularly. We meet once a month and have for nine years now. And that is rewarding in a way that is distinct from what happens at the University. But it’s not the same. And some of it, I wonder if it is about my age, like I don’t think I was connecting as well with the youth at the youth center, partly because of the time I was spending in
there, but part of it is that I’m older. I just wasn’t the same person. So the question of how do I feel about this work versus that work, I think it’s an ongoing struggle for me. And I wish that it was the kind of job where you could really do a full-fledged ethnography where you could spend a ton of time in a site, and really immerse yourself. And I imagine a sabbatical might be that for me, instead of being a writing sabbatical, maybe it will be a data collection sabbatical. And that feels exciting to me. That possibility is exciting to me. I think, you can feel the work you are doing when you are working with adolescents, in a way that when you are writing about it – while it might have a far-reaching effect because it’s into more hands in classrooms – I don’t feel it. I don’t get the note that says, “This is worth it.” The note from the kid who says, “This is what you did,” or the parent who is thankful. I think it might have actually farther-reaching effects, but it’s not as personally fulfilling.

Q. That’s so interesting to hear, because when I ask that question it was probably because I was thinking about how, I was expecting that you would say something like, “Well, you know, you can’t do everything. And at this point having the reach that I do with the writing and having it in peoples’ hands who I don’t even know are using it, is what I’m positioned, what I’m uniquely positioned to do.” Because the truth is, not everyone can do what you’re doing in that way, right?

A. Right.

Q. I feel like there are a lot more people who can go and volunteer at a youth center than there are people who can write the kinds of respective work that you’re writing. So I kind of expected you to say, “Well I have to come to terms with that.” But you’re saying, “Well, no, this is an ongoing question.”
A. Yes, I think so.

Q. That makes sense, too, because that goes along with what I’m always saying about how you don’t just get an answer or get a solution to something and coast with it, but you’re always recalibrating and rethinking. So you’re kind of confirming that that’s exactly.

A. That resonated with me, it does. It resonates with me.

Q. Okay, well very cool. I think it’s really true. Not everyone can do the particular thing that you’re equipped to do. And I try to, I don’t know, because I think there’s a lot of guilt that can go along with any scholarship really that’s social justice-oriented, that will, if you’re not in the streets or if you’re not hands on, then you’re not doing something. And I just think that, well, actually we’re needed in every arena. And not everyone can work at the level that we’re working, and so we need to value that level that we’re particularly equipped to work at, you know?

A. Have you talked to Joe about that?

Q. Joe? No.

A. Because we’ve had a similar conversation about the guilt, and what is activism and what can it look like in different contexts.

Q. He’s more conflicted than I am. And right now we’re talking about Joe Ponsey, who is a professor of English, who does Asian-American Literature. He’s a lot more conflicted than I am. I’m more like uh-huh, this is what I can do.

A. I got a hit and I’m going to share it.

Q. Exactly. I can’t claim that I have the patience to deal with any ol’ body. I just don’t have that kind of patience. So voila, it’s not just about that. So here’s the other thing I’m really interested in, as I look at you as a role model, you have this kind of recognition, like
international recognition for your research, and yet you’ve still continued to do things that are gaining recognition locally from Ohio State, even in terms of teaching and service. So I’m wondering if you’ll talk about how you approach your existence in the world. How do you look at your role at Ohio State in relationship to your role in the profession and in the world? Do you sometimes feel like you have to give more energy and focus to things that are going to have an impact outside of Ohio State? Do you sometimes feel like you have to shift toward Ohio State? What is that about?

A. This might be one of those things that the people who know how to do academia are better than doing than I am. I think I tend to say yes to the things that I think matter, or can make a difference in the world, or that I value. Or, if I do it I will learn something that will make me better in this world, make me be able to do better work somehow. And I don’t tend to think of it in terms of whether I’m being asked that by the school district or the community or the University or the national organizations or the international organizations. I probably should pay more attention to that, right? It seems like a really reasonable thing. And there are times when I say yes or no and I was wrong. Like I’ll agree to do something and I think I’m really going to benefit from it and, truth is, I’m not really learning that much. I’m not really giving that much. This just does not pan out the way I wanted it to. Or I thought I had a voice, but it turns out I was just put on there to pretend to have a voice. And so I’m learning from that too. So I don’t feel like I’ve got it nailed down by any means. But I try to say yes to the things that I think matter. Okay, so when I was in for my fourth-year review, I was told that I needed to do more college-level and university-level service. I had done mostly department-level service. Now I am sure what they meant was not what I did but I didn’t get it, because I didn’t know. So
what I said yes to was the equity and diversity committee at the college level and sexuality studies at the university level. I’m sure what they meant was not that, right? But those are like, “Okay, I can do college level.” So I think I try to pick the things that matter to me, and when they do matter to me, I’m in it heart and soul. And when I find out they don’t matter to me, then I’m not really good at it. I will text too much in a meeting. I disengage. I’m just not good at those things. I think the things I’ve have been recognized for doing all right in are the things that I’m in it heart and soul. I’m doing it because I believe in it and it’s fulfilling and it matters.

Q. So especially given that that’s the answer, what about lessons learned along the years about saying no? Especially if you know that if you say yes, you’re going to give it your all. It seems to me that that makes saying no even more important.

A. I think it does. I think – and actually I think this is a constant struggle too – is that saying no to people I don’t connect with about things that aren’t important to me, that feels pretty easy. What am I going to lose? Are they going to be mad at me? They’ll get mad at me anyway, I don’t know. When it’s somebody who I connect with doing something I’m not invested in, that’s harder. That feels like I want to do it because I value you, even if I don’t really value that effort. And I’m not very good at that. And also sometimes I think, if somebody I connect with asks me to do it, then I believe that somewhere, somehow it’s going to be good.

Q. It’s not clear yet.

A. I believe it. It’s got to be in there. And then sometimes I’m just wrong about it. Like stepping out of sexuality studies was hard. That felt like work I believe in with people who I believe in, but it felt, actually this might be one of those times where it was like a
balancing. It felt like I was putting time and energy into things that weren’t fruitful. And that is part of like, you know how I said one of the things Ohio State does that makes the kind of work I do less rewarding or difficult or something, is about the kind of constantly begging for resources thing. I felt a little like the University was kind of working us, and that to continue in that is to be complicit in that relationship. And so to step out of that felt like the right thing to do, but it felt bad because there were people and work that I just really valued. And this feels bad too, maybe one of the reasons I felt like I could is because I knew it would continue. And that feels bad. But the thing I was saying that was related to that balance across different units is, I had been told by my chair, “You have plenty of service work you could be doing here,” kind of thing. And I don’t think it was meant as mean but I think that person was very cognizant of how much time and energy I was spending outside of my department, and really struggling with finding people to lead certain things in the department. And it felt like, “Okay, that’s fair.” It’s fair that I carry the weight, carry some weight in the department too. It’s not reasonable for me to expect other people to all do that. But that was hard. I basically made a decision to step away from sexuality studies and into undergraduate studies chair for my department now, when I’ve never taught an undergraduate class. We didn’t have undergraduates. But I work with undergraduate students in sexuality studies. Nobody else in the department had had that kind of experience. So it felt like, okay, I can take what I learned at the University level, I can bring it to my department. It can feel like I’m making a contribution. And I can learn something new. It’s always fun to learn something new. I think that part is hard. I think it’s hard to know when to say no. I don’t know on that front yet. I’ve been in it since August. I don’t know yet whether that was the right thing to say yes to. I still don’t
know. The verdict is still out. And I’m constantly quitting. In my head, like, I’m out. And then all of a sudden I’m doing this and doing this, and I’m like, “No, no, I’m out.” I quit a lot in my head before I ever say no to anything face to face.

Q. That’s funny. So again, though, we’re confirming that we don’t just make a decision and coast. That’s it’s always going to be a negotiation, and that’s part of the work.

A. Yes, I think it is. I do. I really believe that.

Q. We’re getting close to the end of our time probably, so I want to know if there is anything that we didn’t talk about that you want to make sure we talk about?

A. Okay. So let’s see.

Q. So we could talk in terms of the climate on Ohio State’s campus for different populations and what kinds of things have made you aware of that. We could talk about what you think is still undone at Ohio State in terms of progress for women and other groups. Or we could talk about something off the list. But we’ll close with your powerful experience.

A. That was the most troubling question. So the climate in the unit and the University, my department has lost a lot of faculty of color.

Q. Yes, even I have noticed that.

A. Yes. And when I know individual stories, because I know individual stories, it makes sense to me. And I’m thinking, “Well, of course this person would take this position.” But when you look at it as a whole it’s not right. Like something is not right. And simultaneously, many of the faculty of color who are in the department are distant from the functionings of the department. And I understand that as a coping strategy for dealing with a hostile environment. And related to that is an absence of, we had a lot of women in leadership in our college and department, but we do not have people of color in those
same kinds of positions. Those things, pulled together, convey we are not taking care of our racial dynamics in our department or in our college. We’ve made explicit efforts to work on race dynamics in the college and in the department, and sometimes they’re just misguided. Like where the work to facilitate a discussion had been put on the faculty of color, for example. So it’s not that the discussions were bad; it’s just like that’s not right. That’s not the way to address this. We recently had a white woman staff member not recognize a black doctoral student who has been here four or five years and is very present in the mail room. And basically somebody said there is a strange person in the mail room. Go check that out.

Q. Go and see what’s going on.

A. And so figuring out like, how are we going to handle that? What happens? What are the consequences for behavior like that? A number of invested faculty are just like, “Do we train her? Do we fire her? What do we do? What can we do?” But it’s not about that particular case. That situation is emblematic of a larger situation, that we are in a context where that could have happened, where we could have allowed for that to happen? The question was about climate. Equity issues. I guess that’s what I feel like we need to figure out – how to make our department and our college better places for faculty and students of color, but I feel like we are being so charged with things like action plans, strategic planning, these things that almost feel like they make us or don’t allow us to pay attention to the important stuff. That we get so busy with these tasks that we don’t get to pay attention to our climate. And I worry about that a lot. And it’s not that I’m trying to be a slacker. I’m not trying to get out of work. It’s that I want it to be a better place.
Q. So I hear you saying that Ohio State does bureaucracy incredibly well. And the pressure to do that has only seemed to go up with an increase in terms of reports that are due, action plans that you’re supposed to show that you’re implementing and that kind of thing. And you’re saying that from your vantage point in Education and Human Ecology, you are seeing the consequences of more paperwork on relationships at every level.

A. Right.

Q. In a college that is about educating the future at every possible level. At a college that is about educating people to be citizens of the world, citizens who are actually engaged with their environment. And so these are kinds of mechanisms that are actually preventing that kind of engagement.

A. Right, it’s like they distance us from our own humanity. It’s like the paper creates a block from humanity. And that’s I think having devastating consequences.

Q. Wow, that’s big. So then to have in our Archive the importance of thinking about detaching from tasks, detaching from actions plans enough to actually interact, is actually big. That’s big and that could re-orient administrative relationships in every level.

A. Right, right.

Q. And that’s a reorientation we clearly need.

A. It is. I really think that.

Q. I’m thinking about how one of the things that you said that really kind of stood out to me was, this idea about the defense mechanisms of the few folks of color and their defense mechanism to detach in certain kinds of ways. And I know for sure that that’s one of my ways of surviving.

A. Right.
Q. But one of the things that I often wonder about myself is, you know, is this something I would do no matter where I was, or is it particular to Ohio State? I constantly ask that question because I really don’t know. My suspicion is that Ohio State is no worse than a lot of places.

A. I agree.

Q. However, I’m always being challenged on that.

A. Yes.

Q. If I go to the Four Fellows Foundation Conference, for example, and I’m insisting that it’s no worse than other places, people are like, “No, it is worse.”

A. Very, very.

Q. Oh no. Seriously. And that really trips me out. But there are some moments, I guess what I’m saying is, that there are lots of moments when sometimes I’m also aware of my investment in refusing to see that it’s worse. I’m actually invested in that in certain kinds of ways.

A. But you need to make your life work for you, right?

Q. Yes. So I don’t know. But it is interesting to think about what you’re saying in terms of bureaucracy because one of the things that I, as someone who was going through the tenure process, I’ve appreciated the bureaucracy of Ohio State for that reason. I felt like because we had a review every single year, because the department was so big, because they did it as a committee of one, the bureaucracy was protecting me. I couldn’t make that many people mad, no matter how much I called them out on their white privilege. I couldn’t make that many people mad, to where this paper trail was suddenly …

A. Useless.
Q. Exactly. And so the bureaucracy of Ohio State has been something that I’ve liked, and the size has been something that I’ve liked. But to think about the degree to which doing bureaucracy well can also be a real stumbling block to human connection, is really quite big. But it makes sense.

A. What you’re saying makes perfect sense too, because I remember feeling like, as long as I have this many publications, nobody is going to reject me on the grounds of my content. So I can put queer in every title, if I have 12 titles. I can’t put queer in every title if I have five. But I can if I have 12.

Q. Yes.

A. And so I hear you. The number counting, it does, there’s a kind of security in it, too.

Q. Wow. I think that that’s a huge nugget that we have left for the Archive, to think about the bureaucracy and its benefits, as well as its shortcomings. So if you do want to share something about the most powerful experience you’ve had at Ohio State, I am certainly going to give you that opportunity. But I’m not going to pressure you. So the question on the table is, could you talk about the most powerful experience that you have had at Ohio State, and I guess in that situation it could be just during your years at Ohio State, because maybe it’s something that happened in the community.

A. This is the thing. When I read this question, I thought, okay, so this is the cheerleader moment, right? You put your last question. Like I’m supposed to go O-H here, right? And when I thought back to the most powerful experience, and I spent a lot of time like starting to walk around and thinking about this one, the thing that came up is going to seem so, well it’s not going to sound like a cheerleader, that’s for sure, but it’s also going to seem minor. But I’m going to try to explain it in a way that feel why it’s the most
powerful experience. So the year I came up for tenure, I went on the job market. I got an offer at a place where I could really imagine having gone. I could imagine that life there. Like it was really appealing to me. And at Teachers College. So it’s a higher rank institution or whatever. But they didn’t offer partner employment, and I was a parent. I became a parent just a year before. And I couldn’t imagine not having two salaries and being in New York. It was hard to imagine that. And so I was genuinely conflicted. And so when I was trying to do the counter-offer thing, which I admit I am not good at. I did not learn how to talk about money. Many women I think are in that position. They said, “Well, we’ll meet the salary.” And I was like, “Okay, let’s stay here.” They were going to match the salary that was offered. And I was really going back and forth. I was like, “Okay, let’s stay.” And then three days later I was at a faculty meeting on Kenny Road, my chair said, “Well, they’re meeting the salary but then you won’t get your tenure raise,” which you know is not very much. It’s like 6% or something. But I ran out of the faculty meeting and there’s a big field, and I just ran as far as I could and I was furious. I was furious. And it was in no way about money because this job has never been that. That is not what my work is about. But it was about a recognition that for me, that tenure raise was about all of this work. This investment, this heart, soul, passion effort. And for them, it was about numbers. And it crushed me. It crushed me. Again, it was not about the money; it was about the belief. They believed that for me, as long as I was getting the money it was fine, but for me to say that you’re taking away my tenure raise, felt like, you have no idea what I’m about. You don’t even care what I’m about. And that moment, it was a defining moment in my relationship with Ohio State, because it let me know that I need to do the things that I do for me, because I care about them, because I value them,
and that’s why I need to do them. To do them because I think they’re going to recognize it or because they value it, that is not the reason to do it. Because that is not how it is going to go down. And so it sounds really angry but I’m not angry about it at all. It’s almost like when you learn your parents don’t know everything or something, that you catch on that your parents have flaws. It was just like, it was almost liberating, right? It was like, oh, I am an adult and you are an adult, but we are two separate adults. And we have a particular kind of relationship and I understand the parameters now better than I ever did before. I think before that I really thought the University was taking care of them, and I don’t believe that. And it was upsetting but it was probably the most powerful experience. It felt like a coming of age. It felt like a professional coming of age. Like, okay, okay.

Q. So really a paradigm shift.
A. Yes.

Q. So a powerful moment because it really has shifted your perspective.
A. And it hasn’t changed.

Q. Yes.
A. I’ve never gone back on that belief. I’ve never believed, I believe that individuals care for and are invested in me, but as an institution, no. Maybe that will change. Maybe that’s one of those things like all those others, that I will shift my thinking over time. But that has been six or seven years ago. It felt really big to me.

Q. Yes, definitely.
A. It felt big to me. It just felt like, okay. It seems like how you look at, they give you those campaign things and you’re supposed to give money to different things or whatever, like I feel very, I don’t buy into the team spirit in that way. I’m just kind of like …

Q. And heaven forbid, when they try to use the family language.

A. Right, right, right. That is a little bit sad but a little bit liberating and a little bit okay. It’s just okay.

Q. Thank you so much for sharing that. That’s a good one.

A. No, O-H, huh?

Q. All right. We are really pleased to have Mollie Blackburn in our Women Voices of Ohio State Archive. Thank you so much for your time.

A. Thank you for your time.